

Antoinette J. Lee

## Supporting Working Women YWCAs in the National Register

**T**he eight Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places provide insight into the status of working women from the mid-19th century to the present. YWCAs are significant in American history for their role in providing crucial social services to working women. Many also are significant for the architectural qualities of the buildings themselves. The National Register documentation for these buildings provides an introduction to this important organization and illuminates key aspects of women's history from the late-19th through the 20th century.

YWCAs eased the transition of women from rural areas to the cities, from home to the world of work, and from domestic pursuits to careers in offices and factories. Prominent women in their respective communities established YWCAs, raised funds to construct YWCA facilities, furnished the facilities, and served on YWCA boards of directors. The organization continues today to serve the cause of working women.

The YWCA movement began in England in 1855, as two separate organizations: the Prayer Union and the General Female Training Institute. The two organizations united to become the YWCA and worked to improve the working conditions of women brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Three years later, in 1858, the Ladies Christian Association was established in New York City. Thereafter, YWCA organizations spread rapidly throughout the United States, further

fueled by the evangelical movement in Christian churches and increased educational opportunities for women. The world YWCA, founded in 1894, is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland; the YWCA of the U.S.A., founded in 1906, occupies offices in New York City.

For much of the 19th century, YWCA organizations in the United States operated out of existing buildings, such as churches. Starting in the early-20th century, YWCA organizations in the nation's cities and larger towns constructed new facilities designed to meet their unique requirements. The facilities usually housed a cafeteria, a gymnasium, offices, a library, and lounges on the public floors and dormitory rooms on the upper floors or in an adjacent block. In appearance, the YWCA buildings were designed to provide more than functional spaces; they were monuments to the women who supported the YWCAs and those who were served by them.

Many YWCA buildings were similar to academic buildings that could be found at women's colleges during this period. Revival styles, most often colonial or Georgian revival, were the styles of choice. Their domestic institutional atmosphere provided familiar, welcoming, and homey surroundings, even if the lobbies were on a grand scale. Several YWCA buildings aspired to even greater statements. For example, the Richmond YWCA building was considered comparable in scale and design treatment to the established men's clubs in the downtown area. Overall, because of the need to provide similar functions, the YWCA buildings of the early-20th century were similar to YMCA buildings of the same period, except for the strong accent on domesticity with the former.

The YWCA offered the first boarding house for female students, teachers, and factory workers in New York City. In other cities, vocational training was offered in typewriting and sewing machine operation; employment assistance was provided to thousands of women; and English-as-a-second-language was offered to immigrant women. During World War I, programs were provided for armed services personnel in the United States and abroad, which led to the formation of the USOs. During the Great Depression, YWCAs provided safe and healthy living and dining arrangements for women displaced from their homes because of economic dislocation. During World War II, YWCAs served women war workers. Interestingly, several YWCAs extended services to Japanese-American women and girls incarcerated in World War II relocation centers.<sup>1</sup>

Each YWCA property listed in the National Register embodies the organization's major goals in assisting working women. Each also provides its

*The Central YWCA building in Richmond, Virginia, was constructed in 1913-14 to serve young women who came to Richmond to work in its tobacco factories, department stores, and offices. Photo courtesy H. Christopher Slusher.*



own unique and local dimension to the national movement. The Central YWCA in Richmond, Virginia, is an important example. Constructed in 1913-14, it provided employment referral services, room and board facilities, and physical fitness programs. The travelers aid program met trains carrying young women to Richmond to work in its tobacco factories, department stores, and offices. The Beaux Arts Palazzo style of the building was compatible with the other private, mostly male, clubs in downtown Richmond.

The Central YWCA in Richmond operated similar programs for women and girls in the city's African-American population at the Phyllis Wheatley Branch. Despite the separate facilities, efforts to promote interracial cooperation began in 1925, when a member of the Wheatley branch was invited to sit on the Central board of directors. In the following decades, the Central YWCA fostered studies of the economic and social needs of the black community. By the mid-1960s, the YWCA integrated all of its programs and facilities and promoted the elimination of racism in other areas of Richmond life.<sup>2</sup>

The sizeable 12-story neo-Gothic YWCA in Cincinnati, Ohio, represents the scale of accommodations needed for women in a major urban area. The Cincinnati YWCA featured a chapel, meeting rooms, gymnasium, and individual dormitory rooms. During the Great Depression, the Cincinnati YWCA provided training classes and facilities for WPA projects. During World War II, a USO Center hosted thousands of military personnel. The Cincinnati YWCA cooperated with the Red Cross in organizing the "Contact Club," which met "the recreational needs of Japanese-Americans who relocated in Cincinnati."<sup>3</sup>

Constructed in 1934, the YWCA in Yakima, Washington, illustrates other aspects of women's history in the United States. The Yakima YWCA president Mary Remy devised the design for the buildings, which was then finalized by Yakima architect John Maloney. This building also can be

viewed as an appropriate expression of the nation's interest in the roots of American architecture, which was embodied by the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding of the YWCA movement in the United States can be enhanced through the examination of National Register nominations of related institutions. For example, the 1930 Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association Building in Baltimore, Maryland, was the first Jewish "Y" in the nation. It provided educational and social services and bridged the cultural gap between the older and newer Jewish communities in Baltimore. Another related National Register property is the Barbizon Hotel for Women in New York City, constructed in 1927. The Barbizon was a dormitory-like residential hotel for women that supported their entry into adult careers in the business and the arts. Today, the building serves as a hotel. The many parallel women's philanthropic clubs listed in the National Register can also expand our knowledge of and appreciation for the theme of working women during much of the 20th century.

Although they operate today within a context different from their historical roots, YWCAs continue to provide vital services to working women today.

Based on their central role in women's history, there are doubtless many more YWCA facilities that could be nominated to the National Register. While all can be related to the national and international YWCA movement, they also reflect their times and embody the special circumstances of the women and communities that they served.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "YWCA Historic 'Firsts' & Other Milestones," YWCA of the U.S.A. homepage on the World Wide Web, <<http://www.cybergirl.com/dv/ywca/history.html>>
- <sup>2</sup> Elizabeth S. Brinson and H. Christopher Slusher, "Young Women's Christian Association," Richmond, Virginia, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, October 31, 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> Winston E. Folkers, "Young Women's Christian Association of Cincinnati," Cincinnati, Ohio, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, February 26, 1982.
- <sup>4</sup> Letty Ann Ginn, "Young Women's Christian Association Building," Yakima, Washington, National Register of Historic Places Nomination, July 10, 1992.

*Antoinette J. Lee is Senior Historian for National Programs, Heritage Preservation Services, National Park Service.*

*The YWCA building in Yakima, WA, was constructed in 1934. It was designed by the organization's president, Mary Remy, who admired the architecture of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia. Photo courtesy Leonard Garfield.*

